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Self-handicapping in competitive sport: influence of the motivational climate, self-efficacy, and perceived importance

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Abstract

Objectives: To examine the influence of perceptions of the motivational climate, self-efficacy, and perceived importance on athletes' claimed situational self-handicaps in a competitive sport setting. Perceptions of a task involving climate and self-efficacy were expected to be negatively related and perceptions of an ego-involving climate to be positively related to situational self-handicapping.

Design: Given the centrality of perceived ability in the self-handicapping literature, basic tenets derived from achievement goal theory provided the rationale for the present cross-sectional field study.

Methods: Male 70 and 70 female elite collegiate golfers completed a questionnaire prior to participating in a prestigious national golf tournament (M age = 20.61; SD = 1.52) assessing claimed situational self-handicaps in the week prior to the tournament, perceptions of the team motivational climate, perceived event importance, and self-efficacy.

Results: Preliminary analyses revealed no significant gender differences in regard to the perceived importance of the event or situational claimed self-handicaps. Participants who perceived the event to be of low personal importance reported significantly more claimed self-handicaps during the week prior to the tournament than high importance individuals. A hierarchical multiple regression analysis revealed perceptions of a task-involving motivational climate, self-efficacy, and perceived event importance to be negatively related to claimed self-handicaps.

Conclusions: The findings of the present study suggest that in addition to enhancing self-efficacy, coaches should increase the salience of task-involving cues in the athletic context to attenuate the situational claimed self-handicaps of elite collegiate athletes.
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Keywords: Self-handicapping; Achievement goals

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Coining the term self-handicapping, Berglas and Jones (1978) proposed that some people proactively reduce effort and create performance excuses to protect themselves from potential negative feedback in socially evaluative environments such as competitive sport. Although increasing the likelihood of failure, self-handicapping does afford the individual an opportunity to externalize a poor performance and protect self-esteem. Indeed, it has been hypothesized that self-handicapping is most likely to happen when an individual feels uncertain about his/her ability (Berglas & Jones, 1978), or perceives a threat to his/her self-esteem (Prapavessis & Grove, 1994, 1998). Jones and Berglas (1978) claimed that self-handicappers are "legion in the sports world, from the tennis player who externalizes a bad shot by adjusting his racket strings to the avid golfer who systematically avoids taking lessons or even practicing on the driving range" (p. 201). However, limited research has been conducted investigating self-handicapping in sport, particularly among more elite level performers. Findings from studies that have been conducted have suggested that self-handicapping is uncommon in sport settings (Carron, Prapavessis, & Grove, 1994; Hausenblas & Carron, 1996; Rhodewalt, 1994). It is interesting to note, however, that athletes are able to readily list several different types of disruptions that occurred prior to a competitive event when self-handicapping is defined as claims that disrupt training or event preparation (Carron et al. 1994; Hausenblas & Carron 1996).

Self-handicapping has traditionally been hypothesized to have a negative impact on performance. However, in a field study of university swimmers and wrestlers, Bailis (2001) reported that among a small subset of participants a positive relationship emerged between a pre-season assessment of dispositional self-handicapping and performance over the first two months of the study. It is significant to note that the results from the same study found dispositional self-handicapping to be associated with poorer practice and nutrition before important events over four months of the regular competitive season in both sports. The negative relationships between self-handicapping and preparatory factors are consistent with a study conducted by Zuckerman, Kieffer, and Knee (1998) that examined the long-term consequences of dispositional self-handicapping, performance, and affect in an achievement setting. Specifically, Zuckerman and colleagues found self-handicapping to be linked to poor adjustment and academic underachievement in two independent samples of undergraduates over the course of two months. In both samples dispositional self-handicapping prospectively predicted academic under-achievement, although this effect was partially mediated by poor study habits.

Although the Bailis (2001) findings suggest that dispositional self-handicapping may benefit athletic performance for some individuals in the short-term, Rhodewalt and Tragakis (2002) contend that there are definite long-term costs of self-handicapping that should not be discounted. Consistent with this contention, a recent study by Prapavessis, Grove, Maddison, and Zillman (2003) found that athletes with strong self-handicapping tendencies are prone to emotion-oriented coping strategies that involved disengagement, passivity, and/or fantasy when faced with a prolonged period of poor performance. Consistent with the findings of Prapavessis and colleagues, therefore, we believe that self-handicapping should be conceptualized as a maladaptive coping strategy as the repeated use of self-handicaps places the athlete at-risk for motivational difficulties that will likely have a negative effect on long-term development and performance.

It is also important to differentiate between claimed and behavioral self-handicaps (Hirt, Deppe, & Gordon, 1991; Leary & Shepperd, 1986; Rhodewalt & Tragakis, 2002). A claimed self-handicap is an excuse that is verbalized prior to performance, even though the impediment may not have actually occurred. It is hypothesized that an individual may claim a self-handicap to reduce his/her accountability for potential failure and reduce others' expectations of his/her subsequent performance. In this instance,

claimed self-handicapping may actually aid immediate or short-term performance as it may reduce the anxiety that is associated with heightened performance expectations (Leary, 1986). In contrast to claimed self-handicapping, behavioral self-handicapping is an actual behavioral impediment to success in which the individual does something that would make it more difficult to succeed, such as not practicing and/or drinking heavily prior to an important competition. Clearly, the effects of behavioral self-handicapping are likely to be far more damaging for both short-term athletic performance and long-term development than claimed self-handicapping.

Previous research has conceptualized self-handicappers as being either chronic or occasional. Chronic self-handicappers use self-handicaps that are more applicable over time and in varied situations, such as pervasive psychological or physical symptoms (Berglas, 1986; Smith, Synder, & Handelsman, 1982). Occasional self-handicappers, also known as state or situational self-handicappers, may be more inclined to use transient self-handicaps developed for a specific situation (Rhodewalt & Davison, 1986). Although most research has examined self-handicapping as a disposition-like concept (Carron et al., 1994; Feick & Rhodewalt, 1997; Rhodewalt, 1994), some researchers have suggested that self-handicapping should be conceptualized as more situation-based (Ryska, Yin, & Boyd, 1999; Ryska, Yin, & Cooley, 1998). Consistent with a more situational approach, self-handicapping was conceptualized and assessed in the present study as a claimed impediment to performance that may or may not have occurred operating at the situational level of generality and analysis.

Previous theory-driven research has identified specific factors that may elicit self-handicapping in athletic environments, such as the perceived importance of the event, strong cohesion among teammates, and a desire to meet teammates' performance expectations (Carron et al., 1994; Hausenblas & Carron, 1996; Ryska et al., 1999). These factors would be expected to intensify the athlete's desire to perform well and could possibly pose a threat to an athlete's self-esteem, perceived ability, or self-presentation efficacy. Given these findings and the centrality of perceived ability in the self-handicapping literature, we would contend that one theoretical approach that may enhance our understanding of the determinants and consequences of the phenomenon in sport is achievement goal theory (Nicholls, 1984, 1989).

An achievement goal approach to understanding human behavior proposes that differences in the way an individual judges his/her competence and perceives success are important factors in determining the intensity and direction of behavior in achievement activities (Nicholls, 1984, 1989). This approach contends that the goal of action in achievement settings is the demonstration of ability and that an individual may adopt two goal states of involvement, namely task and ego. When a task state of involvement is adopted, ability is demonstrated when learning and mastery at the task are achieved and high effort is exerted. Therefore, an individual's assessment of ability is self-referenced and success is perceived when mastery is demonstrated. However, when an ego state of involvement is adopted, ability is demonstrated when the performance of others is exceeded. An individual, therefore, focuses on social comparison and ability is demonstrated when his/her performance is perceived to exceed that of others, particularly when less effort is exerted (Nicholls, 1984).

It is assumed that an individual is task or ego involved in an achievement setting as a result of both dispositional and situational determinants. Specifically, the predisposing tendency to be task or ego involved is thought to be reflected by an individual's dispositional goal orientation. The salience of task and ego involving cues in the achievement context are situational criteria that may alter the probability of adopting a particular state of involvement (Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Nicholls, 1989). The significance of situational determinants in understanding motivation in sport and physical education has recently been demonstrated (Cury et al, 1996; Treasure & Roberts, 2001). In the Cury et al.; Treasure and Roberts

studies, perceptions of the motivational climate, namely the salience of task and ego involving cues in the achievement context (Ames, 1992), were stronger predictors of cognitive and affective responses than dispositional goal orientations.

According to achievement goal theory, therefore, perceptions of the motivational climate are an important determinant of the way an individual makes decisions, acts, and thinks about achievement. In a task-involving motivational climate, ability is shown when the task is mastered or a great amount of effort is expended with an individual's self-evaluations being self-referenced. Conversely, in an ego-involving motivational climate, ability is demonstrated by social comparison, when competitors are outperformed. Theoretically, as the perception of an ego-involving motivational climate increases and an athlete experiences self-doubt and increased threat to his or her athletic competence, self-handicapping should increase. For instance, the athlete who perceives a motivational climate that emphasizes normative comparisons and doubts his or her ability may prevent the appearance of looking incompetent by selecting tasks that are very easy or very difficult. These athletes may create self-handicaps prior to performance or act as if they do not expend the maximum amount of effort during competition when failure is eminent. In contrast, as an athlete's competence increases and/or the motivational climate emphasizes task-involving criteria for success, it would be expected that a commensurate reduction in the need to engage in self-handicapping would occur.

Prior research has demonstrated preliminary support for many of the theoretical propositions presented above. With a sample of adolescent male and female recreational and competitive soccer players, Ryska et al. (1999) found that perceptions of the motivational climate, mainly an ego-involving climate, predicted situational self-handicapping. The researchers argued that the results of their study showed that athletes who participate on teams that emphasize norm-based comparisons are those most likely to engage in self-handicapping. The findings of Ryska et al. (1999) are consistent with Rhodewalt (1994) who found dispositional self-handicapping to be positively related to work avoidance and an ego goal orientation in academics with a sample of undergraduate psychology students.

Gender differences

Although most research has suggested that men self-handicap more than women (Berglas & Jones, 1978; Dietrich, 1995; Harris & Snyder, 1986), results of research on gender differences in self-handicapping is at best equivocal. Interpreting the gender differences that emerged in their study, Berglas and Jones explained that female participants may not have self-handicapped as much as men because the anagram task chosen to elicit self-handicapping was not as ego-relevant for women as for men. Consistent with this interpretation, Dietrich conducted a study that investigated whether gender differences in self-handicapping behavior are dependent on the particular domain of the task, either social or academic, in which the participants engage. Results showed that male participants self-handicapped more than females and continued the task under interfering circumstances, regardless of whether the task was characterized as having social or academic implications. Dietrich concluded that the male participants might have used self-handicapping strategies to preserve an image of competence, regardless of the given domain. Although previous research has examined the influence of gender on self-handicapping, no research to our knowledge has specifically investigated whether male and female athletes would differ in the amount of claimed self-handicapping prior to a task perceived to be equally

important. Theoretically, if the event is perceived as equally important or ego-relevant by both genders, then there should not be significant gender differences in the amount of claimed self-handicapping.

The purpose of the present study was to assess the relationship between perceptions of the motivational climate, perceived ability, and situational claimed situational self-handicapping in a competitive sport setting. For the purposes of the present study, perceived ability was operationalized as sport-specific task self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). Based on the tenets of achievement goal theory, we expected perceptions of a task-involving climate to be negatively related and perceptions of an ego-involving climate to be positively related to situational self-handicapping. Consistent with previous research (Berglas & Jones, 1978), we also expected self-efficacy to be negatively related to situational self-handicapping. Congruent with achievement goal theory, perceptions of an ego-involving climate were also expected to interact with self-efficacy and predict situational claimed self-handicapping.

Due to previous research that has suggested that gender and perceived event importance play a role in the self-handicapping process, we also assessed whether these variables were related to situational claimed self-handicapping in the present sample. Although no significant differences in perceived event importance between the male and female participants were expected, we did hypothesize that perceived importance would influence situational claimed self-handicapping. Specifically, we expected male and female participants who perceived the event to be personally important to report significantly more situational claimed self-handicapping than those participants who perceived the event not to be personally important.

Method

Participants and procedure

The sample consisted of 70 male and 70 female NCAA Division I college golfers competing on 15 male and 15 female varsity golf teams, respectively. A breakdown of the sample by race revealed 78.5% White ($n=102$), 14.6% Asian ($n=19$), 6.2% Hispanic ($n=8$) and 0.8% of other racial background ($n=1$). Ten participants chose not to identify their race. The age of the participants ranged from 18 to 26 years ($M=20.61$; SD = 1.52).

The male and female participants competed in single sex intercollegiate tournaments on consecutive weeks on the same golf course. Both tournaments are prestigious national intercollegiate events with, typically, only the top-ranked teams in the country invited to attend. Collegiate golfers were selected for the sample because the results of the tournament rounds would be easily quantified and the golfers' individual performances would be made public when the scores were posted. It was expected that the combination of these factors would increase self-presentational concerns and intensify the athlete's desire to perform well, which may contribute in the elicitation of claimed self-handicapping.

Prior to the commencement of the tournament, contact was made with the coaches and athletes. The athletes were provided with a letter that explained the risks and time involved in the study and their freedom to withdraw at any given time without prejudice. The athletes were informed as to the general purpose of the study and that answering and returning their questionnaire when they received it one-day prior to the tournament would be considered consent to participate. Consistent with the informed consent procedure described above, a questionnaire packet was distributed and completed one day prior to

the beginning of the golf tournament. At the completion of the tournament, each participant was given a letter that described the self-handicapping phenomenon in detail.

Measures

Situational claimed self-handicapping

Previous research in sport has shown that athletes, when prompted, can readily list several different types of disruptions that occurred prior to a competitive event when self-handicapping is defined as claims that disrupt training or event preparation (Hausenblas & Carron, 1996; Rhodewalt, Saltzman, & Wittmer 1984). We chose 20 disruptive events that have emerged from previous research in creating a scale to assess what we defined as situational claimed self-handicapping. Items included 'I felt tired,' 'I was injured,' 'I was distracted by personal problems,' 'I was busy with/distracted by school commitments and course work,' and 'My equipment was not up to par.' The athletes responded to the stem 'In the week before the tournament my preparation was disrupted by …' on a seven-point Likert scale anchored by strongly disagree (1) and strongly agree (7). The items were then summed so that higher scores indicated more claimed self-handicaps in the week preceding the tournament.

Perceived event importance

Previous research has suggested that for individuals to be motivated to self-handicap, they should perceive the event to be of importance (Self, 1990). With the present study, therefore, the athletes were asked to rate the degree of personal importance of the upcoming tournament on a 9-point scale similar to the procedure used by Hausenblas and Carron (1996). The scale was anchored by 1 (not at all) and 9 (very much so).

Perceived motivational climate

The perceived motivational climate in sport questionnaire-2 (PMCSQ-2; Newton, Duda, & Yin, 2000) was administered to determine each athlete's perception of the task and ego involving nature of his or her team climate. The athletes read an introduction of 'On this team…' and then responded to statements that concerned an aspect of the team climate along a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (disagree very much) to 7 (agree very much). The questionnaire was modified for the present study by substituting the word 'tournament' for 'game' when appropriate. The 33-item measure is separated into two higher order factors, namely task and ego involving motivational climates that consist of three second-order factors, respectively. For the purposes of the present study, only the higher order task and ego involving factors were used in the analyses. Newton et al. (2000) have recently reported data showing the PMCSQ-2 to possess adequate internal consistency and construct reliability.

Self-efficacy

Consistent with the procedure adopted by Treasure, Monson, and Lox (1996), meetings were initially held with college golf coaches and golf professionals to identify the specific skills regarded to promote successful golf performance. Performance was divided into four sections: short game, approach shots, tee shots, and course management. Within these four broader sections, specific skills such as putting, chipping, pitching, bunker play, short irons, long irons, fairway woods, driving, and course management were identified. The participants were asked to indicate the degree of confidence with which they believed they were capable of successfully performing a total of 23 skills indicated during the upcoming

tournament. The scale ranged from 0 (no confidence) to 100 (complete confidence). The stem for the efficacy questionnaires was, 'In the upcoming tournament, I believe that I can consistently…' and the four sections of specific golf skills followed. The individual's overall self-efficacy rating was created by adding together all of the efficacy ratings and dividing by the number of total skills.

Data analyses

An independent sample *t*-test was initially conducted to determine if male and female participants differed in the perceived importance of their respective events. To examine gender differences as a function of perceived personal event importance, a two-factor univariate analysis of variance was conducted with gender (male/female) and event importance (high/low) as the independent variables and situational claimed self-handicaps as the dependent variable. Consistent with previous research (Hausenblas & Carron, 1996), participants who rated the current tournament to be equal to or greater than seven on the nine-point personal event importance scale were classified as individuals who rated the event as having high importance ($n = 126$). Those participants who rated the tournament importance less than seven on the nine-point event importance scale were classified as individuals who rated the event to be of low personal importance ($n = 14$). Due to the unequal cell sizes, Type III sum of squares was used in this analysis.

Correlation analyses were initially conducted to examine the pattern of relationships between perceptions of the motivational climate, self-efficacy, and situational claimed self-handicaps. A hierarchical multiple regression procedure was then conducted to determine the variance in claimed self-handicaps accounted for by perceptions of the motivational climate and self-efficacy. Consistent with Rhodewalt and Tragakis (2002) recent categorization of self-handicapping motives as proximal and distal, self-efficacy was entered first into the regression analysis as it was conceptualized as a concern in the immediate situation that would trigger self-handicapping. Perceptions of the motivational climate were conceptualized as distal motives and were, therefore, entered second in the regression while the interaction of self-efficacy and perceptions of the ego-involving climate were entered last. Variables that did not contribute significantly to the regression equation were excluded from the final regression model.

Results

Descriptive statistics

Cronbach alpha coefficients (Cronbach, 1951) for all measures were calculated. All subscales demonstrated acceptable internal consistency based on Nunnally's (1978) criterion of 0.70 for the psychological domain. Descriptive statistics and Cronbach alpha coefficients for all subscales and variables are provided in Table 1 for the total sample and separately for male and female participants.

Gender differences in perceived event importance

As hypothesized, the findings from an independent sample *t*-test showed that male ($M = 8.06$, SD = 1.5) and female ($M = 8.00$; SD = 1.18) participants did not significantly differ in perceived event importance.

Table 1
Internal consistencies, means, and standard deviations for all sub-scales for males, females, and the overall sample

Measures	α	Overall ($N=140$)		Males ($N=70$)		Females ($N=70$)	
		M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Age (years)		20.6	1.52	21.0	1.51	20.3	1.45
Self-efficacy	0.94	74.9	12.1	75.8	13.7	74.0	10.3
Situational claimed self-handicapping	0.85	2.60	0.87	2.56	0.86	2.64	0.88
PMSCQ-2							
Task-involving perceptions	0.90	5.57	0.86	5.39	0.91	5.74	0.77
Ego-involving perceptions	0.85	3.55	0.95	3.77	0.85	3.32	1.00
Perceived importance		8.03	1.35	8.06	1.50	8.00	1.18

Univariate analysis of variance and effect size

The results of a two-factor (gender × event importance) univariate analysis of variance revealed no significant main effect for gender or significant interaction effect between gender and perceived importance in situational claimed self-handicapping. However, a significant main effect for event importance [$F(1, 136)=7.99$, $p<0.01$] in explaining situational claimed self-handicapping did emerge. Examination of the group means revealed that participants who perceived the event to be of low personal importance reported significantly more situational claimed self-handicaps than high importance individuals (low importance $M=3.21$, SD$=1.07$; high importance $M=2.53$, SD$=0.82$). The effects size (ES) for tournament importance between the two groups was calculated ($M_1-M_2/\mathrm{SD}_{\mathrm{Pooled}}$) to examine the magnitude of the statistical finding. Due to the unequal sample sizes, the pooled standard deviation of the comparison groups was used as the measure of group variability (Hedges, 1981). An ES of 0.8 for tournament importance emerged. Consistent with the standards advocated by Cohen (1988) for the social and behavioral sciences, an ES of 0.8 was considered meaningful and large. In contrast to previous research that has excluded those participants who did not report the event to be of importance (Hausenblas & Carron, 1996), these participants were retained in the present study and perceived importance included in all subsequent analyses. It is important to note, however, that although the magnitude of the effect size was large, the mean for the low importance group was marginally below the mid-point of the situational claimed self-handicapping scale.

Correlation Analyses

The bivariate correlations for the variables of interest are displayed in Table 2. A significant positive relationship was revealed between the perceptions of an ego-involving motivational climate and self-handicapping ($r=0.19$, $p<0.01$). As expected, significant negative relationships emerged between self-handicapping and perceptions of a task-involving motivational climate ($r=-0.23$, $p<0.01$) and self-efficacy ($r=-0.29$, $p<0.001$), respectively. A significant negative relationship also emerged between perceived event importance and self-handicapping ($r=-0.24$, $p<0.001$).

Table 2
Bivariate correlations for the variables of interest ($N=140$)

Variables	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Situational claimed self-handicapping (1)	1.00				
Task involving motivational climate (2)	−0.23[a]	1.00			
Ego involving motivational climate (3)	0.19[b]	−0.49[a]	1.00		
Perceived event importance (4)	−0.24[a]	0.05	−0.11	1.00	
Self-efficacy (5)	−0.29[a]	0.12	−0.01	0.13	1.00

[a] $p<0.01$.
[b] $p<0.05$.

Hierarchical multiple regression analysis

Similar to self-efficacy, perceived event importance was conceptualized as a proximal motive for situational claimed self-handicaps and was, therefore, entered at step one in the regression analysis. The final hierarchical multiple regression equation is displayed in Table 3. As hypothesized, perceptions of a task-involving motivational climate and self-efficacy were significant predictors of situational claimed self-handicaps. In addition, perceived event importance emerged as a significant predictor of situational claimed self-handicapping in the final regression equation, [F (3,136)=8.48, $p<0.001$]. Examination of the standardized beta coefficients revealed that all three variables were negatively related to self-handicapping. Perceptions of an ego-involving climate and the interaction of the ego-involving climate and self-efficacy did not emerge as significant predictors of self-handicapping in the final regression equation.

Discussion

Although anecdotal references in mainstream social psychology to self-handicapping occurring in sport abound, a modest number of studies have been conducted to confirm this position or to ascertain possible determinants of the construct (Berglas, 1990; Jones & Berglas, 1978; Rhodewalt, 1990; Strube, 1986). However, the findings in the present study do appear to be similar to previous studies in the prevalence of self-handicapping in a sample of elite collegiate athletes. Specifically, the athletes in the present study reported a small amount of self-handicaps present in the week prior to competition. This suggests that claimed self-handicapping might not be as prevalent in elite level competitive sport as is commonly referenced in the social-psychology literature. That said, the present study did afford the opportunity to examine the pattern of relationships among self-efficacy, perceptions of the motivational

Table 3
Final hierarchical multiple regression analysis showing variance accounted for in situational claimed self-handicapping by perceptions of the motivational climate and self-efficacy

Predictor	Standardized beta coefficient	R^2 change	Total R^2	F change (1, 136)	p-Value
Self-efficacy	−0.24				0.001
Perceived event importance	−0.19	0.12		9.64	0.05
Task involving climate	−0.19	0.04	0.16	5.52	0.05

climate, and claimed self-handicapping beyond the actual amount of reported claimed situational self-handicaps.

In contrast to previous research that has a priori eliminated participants who reported that the upcoming event was not of personal importance in the belief that these individuals would not self-handicap (Carron et al., 1994; Hausenblas & Carron, 1996; Ryska et al., 1999), the results of the present study suggest that this procedure may have eliminated potential self-handicappers. Specifically, our findings revealed that those individuals who did not rate the event to be personally important reported significantly higher amounts of self-handicapping than those individuals who rated the event to be personally important. Perceived event importance also emerged as a significant predictor variable in the final regression equation. In addition to raising some concerns over the methodology followed in previous self-handicapping research, this finding suggests that the most fundamental and significant self-handicap may be the claim that the upcoming event is not important. This interpretation of the present findings should be viewed with caution, however, given three factors. Specifically, these factors include the small number of participants who rated the event as low in personal importance, the potential weaknesses of using a single-item measure to determine event importance, and the overall low scores in self-handicapping reported by the study participants. Therefore, it is our suggestion that future research should examine differences in self-handicapping as a function of event importance before choosing to eliminate or include individuals in subsequent analyses.

Previous research has reported equivocal findings in regard to gender differences in self-handicapping (Berglas & Jones, 1978; Dietrich, 1995; Harris & Snyder, 1986). In explaining this equivocation, some researchers have suggested that females may not have self-handicapped if the nature of the task was not central to their self-concept or the demonstration of competence was less ego relevant compared to males (Berglas & Jones, 1978; Dietrich 1995). In accord with this suggestion, the findings of the present study suggest that when the task is perceived to be equally important, significant gender differences will not emerge in the amount of claimed self-handicaps. In the present study, participants of both genders were all competing in a major intercollegiate golf tournament and the majority of athletes reported the event to be of personal importance. This suggests that the performance was equally ego-relevant and the demonstration of golf competence was important for both male and female participants. Future research, therefore, should assess the ego relevance of the activity for participants of both genders, since this may be an important factor in determining self-handicapping in sport or other achievement contexts.

Based on the findings of the present study, achievement goal theory may be a useful theoretical framework to further our understanding of self-handicapping in sport. Consistent with previous research (Ryska et al., 1999), the results of the present study suggest that the perceptions of the motivational climate and an individual's self-efficacy may be pivotal in determining the individual's decision to engage in self-handicapping or to mitigate the behavior. It would appear that if the motivational climate of the sport context emphasizes task-involvement and self-referenced comparisons of ability, then the possibility that athletes will self-handicap and encounter motivational difficulties would be attenuated. It is important to note, however, that the findings of the present study are specific to claimed situational self-handicapping. As Prapavessis et al. (2003) contend, claimed and behavioral self-handicapping are conceptually distinct, with the determinants of the constructs also possibly differing. Therefore, future research should examine the utility of achievement goal theory in contributing to a complete understanding of the complexities of all aspects of self-handicapping in sport.

Rhodewalt and Tragakis (2002) contend that episodes of self-handicapping are precipitated by a fear that one cannot produce evidence of a skill, ability, attribute, or competence. As the results of the present

study would suggest, possessing high self-efficacy reduces the prospect of an athlete engaging in self-handicapping. However, the context of elite level sport is one that presents participants with challenges to self-efficacy on a regular basis and forces the participant to constantly evaluate his or her ability to successfully complete a stated task or overcome specific barriers. It should not be surprising, therefore, that some athletes may choose to engage in self-handicapping as a coping strategy to protect his/her perceived ability, particularly if normative standards of performance dominate. The results of the present study demonstrate that if perceptions of success and competence are judged in a self-referenced fashion, the amount of claimed self-handicaps may decrease. From an applied perspective, coaches play an important role in influencing the athlete's perception of the motivational climate by structuring the context to emphasize either task or ego-involvement. If a coach wants to facilitate a reduction in situational claimed self-handicapping, then the results of the present study suggest that he/she should strive to de-emphasize ego-involving cues and emphasize task-involving cues in the achievement context.

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